

Table for two, please. I've found Courage. by lilies_in_a_vase

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Summary:

One day in early spring of 1985, Susan Hargrove takes her children and leaves her husband.

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Author's Note:

Not really sure what this is, I had an idea right as I was ready to go to sleep and wrote half of it then, fell asleep, and then finished it.

Disclaimer:

I don't own "Stranger Things".

It's time.

Susan keeps a calendar in her purse. It's small, about three inches in length, baby pink with flower patterns. And today, the 12th of March 1985, has a blue circle around it.

She'd circled it two months ago. Had sat in the kitchen one evening, Neil in the shower washing of his bloody knuckles, Max reading a comic in her bedroom, Billy in his own room, doing his best to drown out his crying with quiet Metallica, his blood drying on the edge of the kitchen counter behind her.

And Susan had made a decision. She had grabbed the first pen she could find in her purse, a blue marker, had taken out her calendar and there, in the kitchen with the moonlight through the window the only light source, she had flipped forward two months and drawn a circle around the date. The 12th of March.

Susan doesn't think she's ever been a particularly strong woman. She likes security. Stability. But she supposes sometimes things just reach

their breaking point.

Sometimes it just becomes too much.

She's taken the afternoon off from her job at the bank, so at lunch time, Susan picks up her stuff and doesn't go into the break room to eat. She brushes herself off and goes to her car.

Her hands are trembling, but her back is straight, her low heels clicking as she walks. The breeze ruffles her hair, the sun warms her skin, but Susan doesn't feel like smiling.

This is not a happy day. This is a desperate, important, dangerous day.

She drives home. Or as close as the house on Cherry Lane has become to a home. Her children miss California. Susan misses California. But Max seems to have friends here, better ones and more of them than she did back home, so Susan doesn't want to destroy that for her daughter.

The boxes they'd packed her house into before leaving for Hawkins are still there, stuffed down in the cellar in case they'd ever need to move something.

Susan gets a few of them out, and a couple plastic bags.

Her first stop is Max' room, because Max is her daughter, and so she will always be first in Susan's heart.

She folds her daughter's clothes into neat piles that she puts in the boxes, in the plastic bags. She puts all her comics and all her stuffed animals, grabs her pillow and duvet and favourite blanket and carries it out to the car.

Billy's room is next, because Susan has decided that she herself will be second to both her children.

His clothes are more neatly placed in his drawers, so it's quicker to put them away. She grabs his stereo and his music and his bottles of cologne and hair care and jewellery and carries them out to the car. She goes back for his pillow and duvet. She doesn't know if he's attached to them, but at least they're something familiar. Something comforting.

Last is the bedroom she shares with Neil. She takes out her clothes, her necklaces and bracelets and earrings, her perfume, and it joins the rest in the car, filling it up to the point where plastic bags end up on the car floor and duvets on the backseat. On her way down the corridor, she stops by the bathroom, grabbing toothbrushes and toothpaste and pads.

There's a cupboard in the hallway, where they keep a folder with birth certificates and school papers and insurance and information on the Camaro and Susan's own car. She grabs the whole thing, placing it in the passenger seat before going back.

Locking the door behind her. (Some strange, perverse part of her feels like she should clean the house first. Get a vacuum out, dust every corner, polish the windows. Susan buries that part deep inside her. Wishes she was strong enough to twist the neck of it, kill it and smother it down until it never dared bare its head again.)

It's two o'clock. Neil won't be home from work until half-past six. And yet her pulse has been racing since she woke up.

If this day ends with her having a heart attack, Susan wouldn't be surprised.

She'd considered a motel at first, but that would be the first place Neil would think to look. Her husband's not an idiot.

And Susan doesn't have any friends in Hawkins. Or, two months ago, she didn't have any friends in Hawkins, not ones that she was close enough to trust with what she's about to do. What she *is*, currently, in the middle of doing.

The logical approach had then of course been to consider Max' friends parents.

Joyce had been her first thought, having heard rumours about her ex-husband. But she'd picked Max up there once, and while she doesn't doubt the woman would help her, Joyce's house isn't big enough for all of them.

Next, she'd considered the Sinclairs. But she didn't know them well enough, didn't know *Mr.* Sinclair well enough to know the type of man he was. Besides, she was a little apprehensive about having Max sleeping so close to the boy she had a reciprocated crush on.

The Wheelers were next, but Susan knows she dislikes Ted, and she doesn't like the way Karen looks at Billy.

Claudia is waiting for her at the car park outside the bank, and she smiles brightly when she spots Susan. It helps relax her nerves, at least a little. Enough to give a small smile back.

They unload the car, moving it all from Susan's to Claudia's. The last thing to be taken out is the notebook Susan's kept in her glove compartment since she made the decision to do this. It has her written accounts, scrawled in a shaky hand while in her car during the morning before going in to work, the only time she knew she wouldn't be disturbed. And it has photographs, polaroids she'd sneakily taken of him while Billy was asleep, unconscious, passed out. Gruesome images of bruises and blood that never should've had a place on a teenagers skin.

Susan clutches it to her chest as she gets in on the passenger side of Claudia's car. Claudia drives them to her house, a beautiful modern one floor building. It has two guest bedrooms, one with a double bed and one that's partly an office, a pullout couch against the wall.

Susan puts her and Max' boxes and bags in the bedroom, Billy's stuff in the office. She's left her own car in the car park of the bank, there for Neil to find.

Claudia tells her she's going to bake them something, something nice and good to comfort and take their minds off things, and Susan doesn't have the heart to tell her that her stomach's rolling too much for her to even consider eating.

She envelopes the other woman in a hug, instead. As they part, Claudia hands her the car keys.

She finds a parking spot near the entrance to the high school, and takes the time to take a deep breath before exiting the car. She finds the administration office quickly enough, and tells them an emergency came up and she needs to pick up her stepson right away.

Somebody is sent to get him, and Susan lets them know she'll wait outside. She needs air.

Her palms are sweaty, trembling.

Billy finds her leaning against Claudia's car five minutes later. He's frowning before he sees her, eyes widening slightly when they land on her. When he sees her looking nervous, wringing her hands, standing in front of an unfamiliar car.

He looks scared.

He looks like he thinks something has happened to his dad. He looks like he thinks Max has died.

“What’s going on?”

Susan doesn’t answer, she only opens the door to the backseat and goes to round the car. “I’ll explain everything. Later. *Soon*. But we have to go now.”

“Susan?” he says, voice confused and small and *so young*.

“Just get in the car, Billy, okay? We have to go pick up Max.”

She sits down in the driver’s seat, lets out a sigh of relief when he climbs into the back.

“She’s okay?”

“She’s fine,” Susan says, starting up the car and pulling out, driving down towards the middle school.

“My dad? What’s-?”

“Not now, Billy.”

“But-“

“Please,” Susan says, her grip on the steering wheel tightening.

She sees Billy glance at her hands in the rear view mirror, sees him swallow and turn to look out at the street outside.

Max’ classes should have ended for the day, so Susan figures she’s probably on her way to AV Club.

It’s blind luck that has Susan finding her almost immediately, seeing her own shade of red on her daughter’s head as she laughs with her friends. They’ve got their backs to Susan, but stop when Susan calls out.

Max swivels around, staring at her. “ *Mum?* ”

“Hi sweetheart. I need you to come with me. We have to go.”

There’s an urgency in her voice that Susan doesn’t think Max has ever heard.

“O-Okay. Bye, guys. I’ll call you later.”

She follows her out to the car, Susan keeping one arm around Max’ shoulders. Max comes to a stop outside, seeing Billy sitting in a car not her mother’s.

“Isn’t that-?”

“Not now, Max,” Susan says, ushering her forward. She gets into the car beside Billy, and as Susan sits down in the front and starts driving, she feels both their gazes weigh heavily on her.

“This is Henderson’s place,” Billy says as Susan pulls up outside. “What the fuck are we doing here?”

“Does Dustin know we’re here? Mum?” Max says.

“Susan? I’m supposed to be having a test in maths right now.”

“Dustin didn’t say anything at school. Why are you driving his mum’s car?”

“This is curly’s mum’s car? Susan? Where’s my dad?”

“Yeah, mum, what-?”

“Both of you: silence!” Susan says, closing her eyes and dragging a hand over her eyes. “Get into the house. Claudia’s made you sweets.”

“‘*Claudia’s*’ done what now?”

“Billy,” Susan sighs.

She hears one of the doors being thrown open, and Max says, “Shut up, she makes the best cakes, come on,” and when she looks up a few seconds later she sees Max dragging Billy with her up to the front door. Despite everything, it makes her smile.

She spends a minute or so, just sitting in the car and breathing, before she composes herself well enough to go in.

Max and Billy are waiting for her, just past the entryway, side by side, shoulders squared and eyes wide.

Behind them, off to the side by the kitchen doorway, stands Claudia, looking concerned. When Susan meets her gaze, she shrugs a little helplessly and steps back into the kitchen, the door closing with a soft click.

“Mum?” Max asks, bringing Susan back to the kids in front of her. “Why is all my stuff in the guest room? What’s going on?”

This is it. This is when she tells them.

“I’m leaving- *We’re* leaving Neil.”

Surprisingly, Max is the one who first reacts to that.

“Really?” she says, her eyes, if possible, widening even more. She breaks out into a wide grin. “Mum!”

She rushes forward, throws her arms around Susan’s middle, and Susan laughs shakily, breath catching. She strokes Max’ hair.

“You *can’t*.”

They both look up at Billy’s quiet mumble. He’s not looking at them, gaze turned to the floor, hands clenched in fists at his side. A fine tremor wracks his frame.

“Billy?”

He looks up at her then. His eyes are big and blue and *scared*. “You can’t just leave him, Susan. You can’t just leave, you can’t just- Not like mum-“ he cuts himself off there, lips pressing tightly together and Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows.

He thinks she’s leaving him too. Abandoning him to his dad’s wrath like his mum did.

He probably hasn’t seen she’d taken his things with her, not only

Max' and her own.

"You're coming with us, Billy. You're not staying with him. I'm divorcing him, and I'm taking you two with me."

He barks out a harsh laugh at that. Max flinches at the sound of it, pressing herself closer to Susan, but Susan recognises it for what it is. Desperation.

"You never fucking adopted me! He's still got custody, he won't let you take me with you, he'll- You can leave with Max, you can run away with her, but you can't take me too. You're stupid if you think you can."

"Hey!" Max shouts. "Don't call my mum stupid!"

Susan holds up a hand, says, "We'll go to the Chief. He wasn't working today, but we'll call him, tomorrow, and ask him to come here so we can talk to him without risking seeing Neil, and then--"

"Oh my god, Susan, he won't believe you. And dad will- fuck, I tried running away from him once, when I was a kid. But the Chief, he- He *hates* me, and he'll just send me back--"

"Hopper wouldn't-!" Max starts to protest, but Susan cuts in.

"I have evidence," she says, and then, quieter, explains, "I've been

writing. Days and times and notes on what Neil's done. And I have photographs. Of... Of what he's done to you, Billy."

It's like the whole room holds its collective breath.

"What?" Billy whispers, voice breathless, tiny. He stumbles backwards, like Susan's slapped him, and sinks into a chair. His hands come up to tangle in his hair, and he doesn't look at them.

Susan gets the feeling that he's trying to hold back tears.

The door to the kitchen opens and Claudia enters, bringing with her the heavenly smell of freshly made cupcakes. She's got a tray in hand, cupcakes spread out.

"I let them cool down a little first," she says, putting it down on the coffee table. She must've heard everything, but Susan's glad she doesn't mention it. "Dig in!"

Max immediately goes to reach for one, thanking Claudia, but Billy pushes himself up to standing without a glance in their direction.

"I'm sorry, I need- I have to..."

"Forth door down the hall," Susan says. "That's we're we put your things."

A strangled little noise leaves him, choked back down so quickly Susan knows he hadn't meant to let it out. She lets him go, eyes following his retreating back sadly.

Dustin is dropped off by the Harrington boy a little while later, and he stares in shock at Max and Susan in his living room, eating cupcakes with his mother.

"Max and her mother and brother will be staying here for a bit," Claudia explains.

Dustin's jaw drops open. "*Billy's* here?!"

Max sighs, taking two cupcakes and standing up, motioning with one of them for Dustin to follow. They start whispering to each other halfway down the corridor, and Susan hears the door to what she presumes is Dustin's bedroom closing behind them.

"How are you feeling, Susan?" Claudia asks her once they're alone.

Susan laughs softly. "I don't know. Worried? Exhilarated? Tired."

Claudia leans forward, placing a hand over Susan's. "You're very brave."

I'm not, Susan thinks. *Had I been brave, I'd have told Max to get in the car and I'd have taken Billy with me the first time I saw Neil hit him, years ago in California.* But she doesn't say that, she just nods. "Thank you, Claudia. For everything. Letting us stay here."

"Of course, dear."

She turns on the TV, and they spend a few hours like that. Eventually, Claudia gets up to start dinner, and Susan offers to help her, but Claudia tells her to stay put. She comes over with a siamese kitten, placing it in Susan's lap. 'Tews', as Susan finds out.

It curls up in her lap, putting as she absentmindedly strokes it.

Neil will be coming home soon. Will see that no one else is home, will see that their closets are all cleaned out, will find that all the kids' important documents are gone. He'll get in his car, and he'll drive by the high school, and he'll see Billy's Camaro be the only car left in the car park, and he'll wonder and he may stop and look, and then he'll continue and he won't find them at the motel right outside town and he might think to go to the bank and see Susan's car parked there and he won't know where they've gone or that Susan's coming for him. Best case scenario he will think that they got a taxi to the airport. That they're on their way back to California.

Billy doesn't join them for dinner, and Susan doesn't blame him. She'd seen Claudia leave with a plate of cupcakes earlier, anyway, so maybe he's eaten those.

Max and Dustin talk animatedly between each other. It's so different

from the dinners Susan's grown used to, more reminiscent of the free way Max talked when Susan was still married to Sam, before that marriage turned sour. It makes her smile that when she gets her own place, decorated it and makes it feel like a home, she might end up having breakfasts during which Billy and Max may talk like this. She hopes she hasn't acted too late for that dream to become reality.

Max hasn't slept in the same bed as Susan since she was a little girl, but as soon as she goes to bed, she curls up close to her, Susan laying down on her side and holding her daughter to her.

But while Max fell asleep quickly, Susan has a much harder time. Every little noise makes her startle, her ears straining to hear the sound of Neil's car approaching.

She gets out of bed then, restless. She closes the door gently behind her, taking care not to wake Max, and isn't at all surprised when she steps into the kitchen to see Billy sitting at the table. He's glancing out of the window, peeping through the gap between the curtains, arms crossed and hands gripping at his upper arms.

"Couldn't sleep? Me neither," she says, getting out a glass and filling it with cold water. She leans back against the counter, looking at him while she sips her water.

"I keep expecting to hear him," Billy whispers, echoing Susan's own thoughts. "I can't calm down, it's like I'm waiting for his car to show up, that the headlights will shine through the curtains and blind me. That he's going to burst through the fucking door." He exhales shakily, the grip he's got on his arms tightening to the point that it must hurt.

Susan hums, and leaves her glass behind as she goes up to him. She reaches out, puts a hand on his head, in his hair. Billy's eyes flutter closed. In the light of the moon, Susan sees his cheeks are glistening.

"You need to sleep," she says, softly. "Come on. I'll stay with you until you fall asleep. I promise that I won't ever let him hurt you again, Billy."

He seems to think it over for a couple seconds before nodding, pushing his chair back and standing up. Susan's always been taller than him, but he's never seemed so small to her before.

They go back to the office, Billy's temporary bedroom, and he lies down on the pulled out couch, curling up on his side with his back to her. Gaze fixed on the window.

Susan sits down on the edge, and starts stroking his hair. He lets out a shuddering breath at it, but doesn't move away, so she continues.

"When I saw everything you took with you, I couldn't help but laugh. I couldn't stop thinking of the expression on his fucking face when he'd see everything was gone. You know, I never thought you'd dare to leave. And I really didn't think you'd take me with you."

"I'm sorry."

He doesn't react at first. Then, "Thank you," so softly she almost didn't hear him.

The door inches open, and Susan turns around to see Max, her duvet around her and her pillow in one hand, the one Claudia let Susan borrow in the other.

Max doesn't say anything to her, she just gets up to the couch and hits Billy with her one pillow. "Scoot over," she says, and Susan hears him huff a quiet laugh but he moves, and Max lies down beside him, not touching but still close enough her breathe makes his hair flutter. She puts Susan's pillow beside her, and pats the spot a couple times without a word.

Susan understands. She lies down, pulls Max' duvet up over both herself and her daughter, and puts an arm around her. The other hand goes back up above Max' head to land in Billy's hair, and lying there, together, she thinks they're safe. Safe enough to fall asleep, confident nothing and no one will hurt her children.

Author's Note:

I hope you guys enjoyed this little thing!